FROM LOCAL SERVICE DELIVERY TO ADVOCACY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: ARE ROMANIAN NGO'S STRETCHED TOO THIN?

Frank Elbers[1] **& Ana-Maria Grigore**[2]

Abstract

In this paper we explore if and how NGO's in Romania address transparency, accountability and effectiveness in their work. We conducted a quantitative analysis based on an exploratory survey of 101 national and international NGO's operating in Romania, based on the comprehensive framework developed by "Accountability Now" (2017), which contains 12 commitments and self-reported standards of organisation about their programme effectiveness, ethical fundraising and communication, and management of issues concerning finance, the environment, human resources and impact on wider society). Our empirical and analytical research also explored the influence of the impact of the global associational revolution: NGO's increasing role in governance and increasing linkages to a (European) institutional constellation of policy bodies, government agencies and donors. Our research show that this expanding role, however, puts a strain on capacity of NGO's in Romania in the ever-increasing competition for limited funding and (human) resources.

1. Introduction

The "global associational revolution" (Salamon, 1995) of the late twentieth century has resulted in an expansion and change of the roles of non-profits at the national level. Yet Salamon focused primarily on the growth of non-profits within each country and their increasing role in internal service delivery and policymaking. However, the landscape of global politics and governance has also been changed by NGO's. Increasingly, NGO's play role in transnational governance and have linkages to a (European) institutional constellation of policy bodies, government agencies, and donors. How can NGO's focus on both service delivery at the national level, be involved in European governance structures, and at the same be effective and accountable? Moreover, in this era of information load, proliferation of (social) media networks that often bring contradictory news (even "fake news") public trust can no longer be assumed, it must be earned. As Robert Edelman put it: "[t]he loss of confidence in information channels and sources is the fourth wave of the trust tsunami." (Edelman, 2018: 2) NGO's have historically been trusted as a remedy for social ills left unaddressed by government. They have an increasingly substantial impact around the globe, with increasingly large amounts of resources at their disposal, and increasingly high levels of trust among the public. (Nelson, 2007) Today, businesses and NGO's are viewed equally as the institutions with in an important role of providing reliable information about—and solutions for—the issues that people care about. (Edelman, 2018) The

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[1] **Frank Elbers** (email: frank.elbers@icub.unibuc.ro) is an associated member of the Research Centre of the University of Bucharest (ICUB). He held leadership positions in NGO's in the Netherlands, Romania and the United States over the past 25 years.
[2] **Dr. Ana-Maria Grigore** (email: ana.grigore@faa.unibuc.ro) is associate professor at the University of Bucharest, Faculty of Business Administration. Her main areas of expertise are management, strategic management, human resources management, and entrepreneurship. Dr. Grigore has published extensively on organisational and strategic management of small- and medium-sized enterprises and social enterprises.

"trust premium" enjoyed by NGO's has prompted media, scholars, governments and companies to raise questions about the roles and responsibilities of these new global, non-state actors. (McGann & Johnstone, 2005; Nelson, 2007) The most frequent questions include: Are non-profits effective? Are they professionally managed? Are they reporting selectively (select the results that support their cause and ignore the data that may be less favourable)? To whom are NGO's accountable? What do we mean by effectiveness? How can it be measured and by whom?

In this paper we focus on how NGO's themselves address these questions using a framework developed by Accountable Now, a global platform that supports civil society organisations to be transparent, responsive to stakeholders and focused on delivering impact. We conducted a nation-wide survey among NGO's in Romania with questions based on the Accountable Now framework.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section provides an overview of the literature addressing effectiveness and accountability of NGO's. Section three presents the data of our survey among NGO's in Romania and discusses the results of our findings and to what extent they reflect main theories in the literature. The last section presents our conclusions and the limitations of the research.

2. Literature review

It has become evident that NGO's face growing pressure to better account and to address perceptions that they are unaccountable. (Schmitz et al., 2012; Crack, 2018) It is well-known that NGO accountability is a complex issue. Organisations need to be accountable to many different sets of stakeholders, which, separately and collectively, play an integral part in their operations. (Lloyd & De las Casas, 2006) Ensuring effective intervention and resource utilisation is vital for all the stakeholders and is a stated goal of NGO's, as well as an expectation of both donors and the general public. (Renhanzo, 2007) Inevitably, different stakeholders hold different perspectives about what effectiveness means in their context. It also seems to be widely accepted that NGO's are diverse, have varying degrees of complexity, nature and political importance and therefore it is complicated to find standards that can apply all of them.

Measuring non-profit organisation's effectiveness is a very difficult task as it is a fluid and evolving concept and requires to "measure the unmeasurable" because of profit non-distribution constraints; plurality of their goals, including production of public goods and support of civil initiatives and collective action; difficulties with measurement of some goals etc.

There is nothing new in suggesting that it is difficult to assess NGO effectiveness. (Renhanzo, 2007; Brown, 2009) For example, a study by the Australian Council for Overseas Aid (ACFOA) found that "NGO effectiveness is more than the result of implementation of designs and plans or other areas of program engagement. It is also a product of the organizational principles, policies and strategies of development. There are a number of practice standards that Australian NGOs agree should apply to field programs or other forms of engagement, in order to promote effective outcomes. However, these standards alone are insufficient to describe and explain effectiveness in Australian NGO work, and must be understood in light of the aforementioned principles, policies and strategies." (Kelly and Chapman, 2003) In this respect, Lewis (2003) underlines that the management of NGO's can be best understood as an improvised performance that continually draws upon ideas and techniques from other fields as part of an ever-

changing, ambiguous and hybrid whole. Smillie and Hailey (2001) refer to the "chameleon-like" quality of NGO leaders and managers, acknowledging this role of improvisation.

Effectiveness and the evaluative processes of measuring it means different things to many experts. Economists, for example, measure effectiveness by assessing the relationship between the inputs, mainly costs of a programme and results or outcomes of the programme in non-monetary form. Thus, from an economic point of view, a programme is more cost-effective when it achieves its intended objectives at the lowest possible cost when compared with alternative programmes with similar objectives. (Renhanzo, 2007) According to Kelly, effectiveness is related to its relevance and significance for people within their context and their own definition of their needs, rather than being something which can be assessed by an external and supposedly objective measure. (Kelly, 2007)

However, what is important is to choose one definition that closely relate to or reflects the nature of development programmes, indicators that best fits development programs, the process for measurement of these indicators and stick to the framework. (Renhanzo, 2007)

The discussion about the accountability and measurement of effectiveness has led to the development of various frameworks and/or standards. Some of these useful frameworks include: the GAP accountability framework developed by One World Trust (2003); The Keystone Capabilities Profiler developed by AccountAbility (2003); a Risk Mapping Tool for NGO Boards developed by SustainAbility Inc. (2003); and the Australian NGO Effectiveness Framework under the leadership of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID 2003). A more complex framework – Accountable Now (the initial name was INGO Accountability Charter) – was launched in 2008. It consists of 12 commitments that are intended to promote the goals of greater transparency, accountability and effectiveness. (Accountable Now, 2017) These commitments are: justice and equality; women's rights and gender equality; healthy planet; lasting positive change; people-driven work; strong partnerships; advocating for fundamental change; open organisations; empowered and effective staff and volunteers; well-handled resources; responsive decision-making; and responsible leadership. These considerations lead ultimately to the necessity of assessing the professionalism and quality of the management of NGO's.
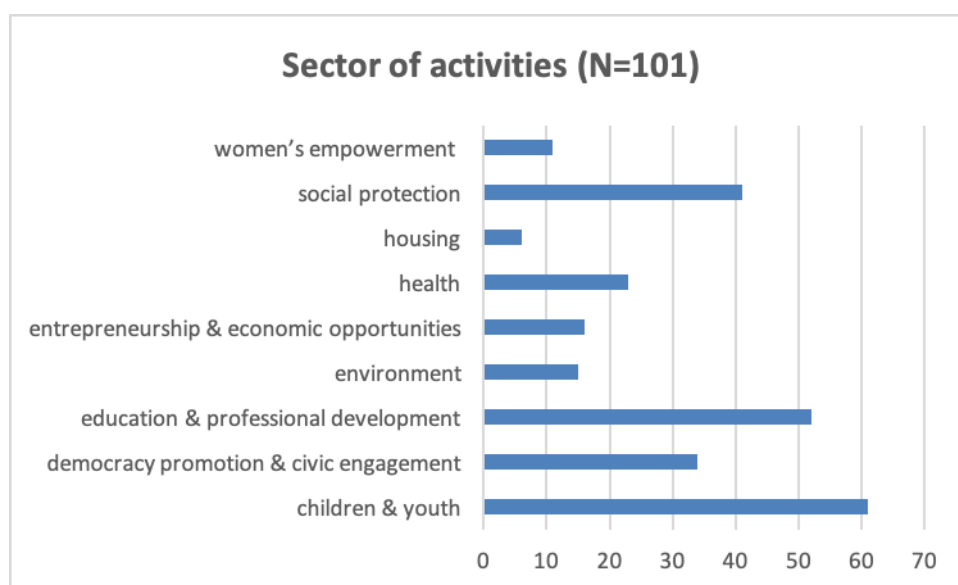
3. Research methodology and main findings

Using this self-assessment model, we administered an online survey to 550 NGO's in Romania via e-mail and Facebook from March 4-April 1, 2019.[3] With 101 completed questionnaires, the response rate was 18,4 %. Our research is an exploratory one and has as main objective to identify to what extent NGO`s apply the framework developed by Accountable Now, the global platform that supports civil society organisations to be transparent, responsive to stakeholders and focused on delivering impact.

The online survey confirms what we already know about the NGO sector in Romania (Fundaţia pentru Dezvoltarea Societăţii Civile, 2011, 2017; Ceptureanu et al, 2017; Civil Society Development Foundation, 2011), and also

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[3] Email addresses and Facebook pages were collected based on a random sampling of NGO's of several databases, including www.ongdb.ro, an online database of all associations registered with the Romanian Ministry of Justice. We define "civil society organisations" (CSO's) as non-state, not-for-profit, voluntary entities formed by people in the social sphere that are separate from the state and the market; they represent a wide range of interests and ties and can include community-based organisations as well as non-governmental organisations (NGO's). (UN Guiding Principles Reporting Framework) "NGO's" are those civil society organisations whose purpose typically is to address a social or political issue.

confirms that our sample is representative: NGO's in Romania are mostly volunteer-driven organisations. 85% of the surveyed NGO's have at least one volunteer, and half of the organisations had more than thirty volunteers at any given moment. This is in line with earlier findings by other studies (Fundaţia pentru Dezvoltarea Societăţii Civile, 2011, 2017; Ceptureanu et al, 2017; Civil Society Development Foundation, 2011). 60-70% of the volunteers are women. The analysis shows that 42% of NGO's in Romania have no (full-time) employees at all. Of the NGO's with staff only eight per cent employ more than 10 people. The fact that only 25% of NGO's employ from three to 10 employees, and 49% has one or two staff members, indicates a lack of financial resources to allow development by relying on employees. Of the paid employees between 50-70% are women.

Sector of activities (N=101)

Sector	Value
women's empowerment	11
social protection	41
housing	6
health	23
entrepreneurship & economic opportunities	16
environment	15
education & professional development	52
democracy promotion & civic engagement	34
children & youth	61

Romanian NGO's mainly operate on shoe-string budgets. Nearly half of the surveyed NGO's had an annual operating budget of under €20,000 in 2018, 33% of them between €20,000-€200,000 per year while only 18% had an annual budget of more than €200,000. The main sources of income were individual donations (72%), membership contributions (38%), EU funding (38%), international donors (28%), and government funding (18%). With these limited budgets, 35% of Romanian NGO's manage to implement 1-2 projects/programmes at any given time; 32% of NGO's 3-5 projects/programmes; 20% between 6 and 9 projects or programmes and 11% of the organisations manage 10 projects or programmes or more at a time. 35% of the NGO's were active at the local level, 29% at the regional level, 51% the national level, and 22% were international NGO's operating in Romania. 28% of NGO's have service delivery as their primary activity, 32% advocacy & policy development, and 63% education & training.

Major activity of NGO's (N=101)
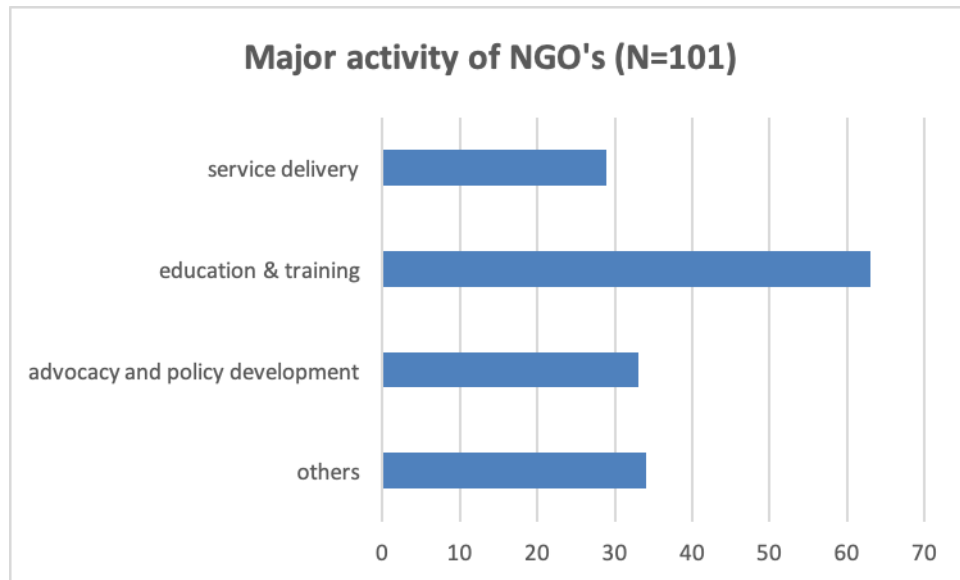
Despite the financial challenges, many NGO's have survived. Of the 101 NGO's surveyed more than half had been operating for 10 years or longer (existed before 2009), which is an indicator of relative stability.

Using the framework developed by Accountable Now (2017), we included a battery of survey questions regarding the 12 commitments intended to promote the goals of greater transparency, accountability and effectiveness.

3.1 Impact achieved

The data show that most NGO's have a strong commitment to 1) address injustice, exclusion, inequality, poverty and violence to create healthy societies for all; 2) promote women's and girls' rights and enhance gender equality; 3) protect the natural environment and enhance its ability to support life for future generations; and 4) deliver long-term positive results. 89% of the organisations routinely are driven by a commitment to promote justice and equality in their daily activities; 75% to women's rights and gender equality; 56% to a healthy planet; and 78% to lasting positive change.

3.2 Stakeholder involvement

Our research also shows that NGO's in Romania want to 1) ensure that the people they work with have a key role in driving their work; 2) work in fair and respectful partnerships to achieve shared goals; 3) address root causes by advocating for fundamental change; and 4) be transparent about who they are, what they do and their successes and failures. 82% of the organisations are committed to people-driven work in their projects or programmes; 68% to strong partnerships; 55% to advocating for fundamental change; and 57% of strive to be open organisations.

Romanian NGO's clearly understand the need of strong partnerships in order to accomplish lasting change: 96% of the surveyed NGO's organise joint activities with other NGO's. They are also well-aware of the need to communicate their work. Almost all of them have a website or Facebook page. Some 31% of NGO's report that they

use other social media (Instagram and Twitter) and 72% distribute printed material such brochures as posters. 62% of the NGO's indicated that they publish an annual report. For a complete break-out see the graph below.

Ways in which NGO's communicate about themselves (external communication) (N=101)
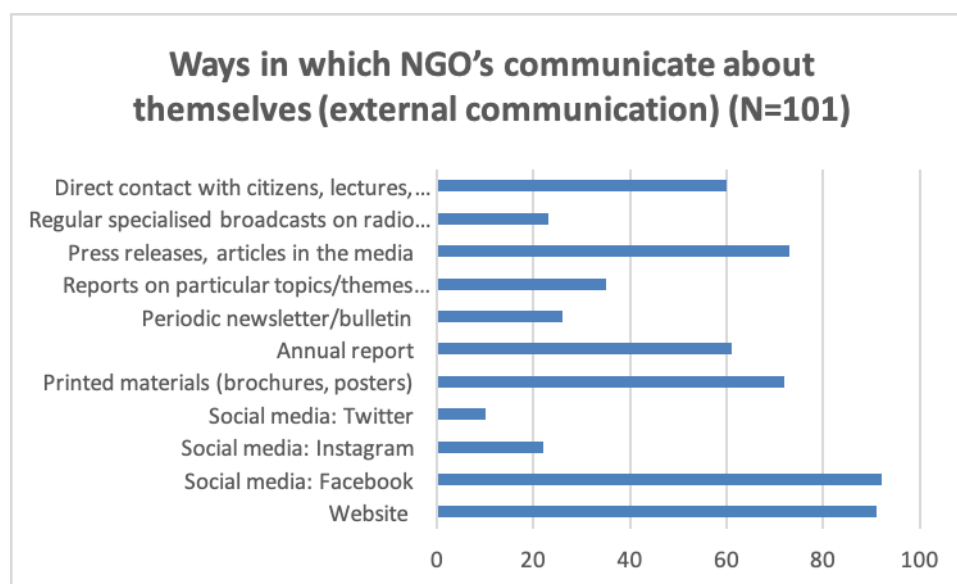
NGO's in Romania also report to communicate regularly and directly with beneficiaries and other stakeholders: 49% through meetings scheduled as needed; 20% through regular meetings between stakeholders and staff; and 23% through one-to-one exchanges/consultations. All this results in a remarkable 92% of NGO's reporting that their beneficiaries are satisfied with NGO's activities.

3.3. Organisational effectiveness

As discussed above, defining organisational effectiveness is difficult, as is measuring effectiveness. As our methodology is based on self-reporting we did not expect to get a better handle on measuring effectiveness. That said, we have found some indications that NGO's in Romania 1) invest in staff and volunteers to develop their full potential and achieve their goals together; 2) handle their resources responsibly to reach their goals and serve the public good; 3) ensure their decisions are responsive to feedback from the people affected by their work, partners, volunteers and staff; and 4) ensure their management and governing body are accountable. Our data show that 77% of the organisations aim to have empowered and effective staff and volunteers; 80% aim to have well-handled resources; 74% responsive decision-making; and 79% responsible leadership. In 52% of NGO's employees are involved in all decision-making processes; and in 40% of NGO's volunteers are involved in all decision-making processes. A remarkable 69% of NGO's reports that stakeholders and beneficiaries are involved in decision-making processes. Finally, 27% involve public experts in programme planning. Communication within organisations is primarily done through meetings scheduled as needed (62%), through regular staff meetings (33%) or one-to-one exchanges/consultation (38%).

When it comes to governance, the picture is slightly different and largely a reflection of the small-size and voluntarily nature of Romani's NGO sector. 42% of the governing bodies (Board) only meets ad hoc; 45% every trimester or quarterly and 22% monthly. We included one question in the survey that asked directly what contributes to the effective functioning of NGO's (multiple answers possible). 91% of the respondents answered effective co-ordination among NGO's; 76% effective leadership; 72% qualified staff; 68% motivated volunteers; and 52% answered that modern equipment and technology contributed to effective organisational functioning.

The data from our survey show that NGO's do measure the impact of their activities systematically (86% report that they evaluate their programmes, for example). They involve stakeholders to a great extent in developing projects and programmes (a remarkable 92% of NGO's reports that their beneficiaries are satisfied with the NGO's activities) and are transparent about their decision-making processes and activities, which they communicate to stakeholders through websites, social media and annual reports.

3.4. Between local service delivery and advocacy in the European Union

Are Romanian NGO's stretched too thin? It is clear that many operate on a shoe-string budget, be they an all-volunteer organisation or a small NGO with few paid staff trying to survive on small project grants. A surprisingly large number of NGO's is involved in both local service delivery and policy influencing (advocacy) and national level and in Brussels. Dependency on EU funding (38%) makes that NGO's are getting more and more involved in policy making and governance at the European level as it indirectly affects availability of subsidies and programme and grant funding. To some extent they also implement EU policy. (Weiler and Brändli, 2015). This creates a tension and leads to a further over-demand on NGO's limited capacity and resources. This trend has not been documented quantitatively but there is anecdotal evidence.

When asked about barriers to their organisation's growth, NGO leaders predominantly mentioned financial barriers (90%) and human resource barriers (55%) as opposed to political (35%) or cultural barriers (13%). At the same time 66% saw a growing willingness of citizens to take part in NGO activities and view NGOs more favourably, 48% experienced that there is currently more freedom to communicate and express different opinions and increased access to the media for their NGO's. This may indicate that in the near future there could be a further demand on NGO's that are already stretched thin.

4. Conclusion

Romanian NGO's have demonstrated flexibility and the ability to adjust to, and operate in, difficult and constantly changing circumstances. However, most NGO's in Romania are still fragile in terms of financial, material and human resources and they are not yet adequately addressing issues of good governance, constituting, therefore, a weak Third Sector.

Because this is not a longitudinal study it is impossible to conclude that NGO's in Romania are more accountable and measure their effectiveness better and more systematically than in the past.

We found some evidence for our claim that NGO's are stretched too thin when trying to be engaged both in service delivery (at the national level) and advocacy (at the national and European levels). This goes for both large and

smaller NGO's. Yet further research is needed to substantiate our claim as the questions in the online survey did not sufficiently address this. We are planning to conduct a series of interviews among NGO leadership, donors, policy makers, journalists and other experts to get to the bottom of this.

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